

# Hope and Change Collide on the South Side

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Jeanette Taylor wants her neighborhood to be protected from dislocation when the Obama Presidential Center opens. Max Herman/The Chicago Reporter

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Chicago's Obama Presidential Center will bring a surge of investment to a long-troubled neighborhood. Why aren't the residents celebrating?

Seven years ago, Jeanette Taylor moved from the South Side Chicago neighborhood of Bronzeville three miles south to Woodlawn. Her Bronzeville unit was going to be rehabbed, the rent tripling. She needed a more affordable neighborhood.

Now Taylor fears her family may be uprooted again. In 2021, the Obama Presidential Center, an estimated \$500 million library campus devoted to the 44th president, is slated to open in nearby Jackson Park, a stroll from Lake Michigan.

"The minute they announced the Obama Library was coming here, I was like, 'What am I going to do?'" says Taylor, whose fears about the economic impact of the center are echoed by others in Woodlawn.

The angst over a library celebrating the nation's first black president may seem puzzling to people who don't live in Chicago. After all, the city—and the South Side in particular—is very much Obama country. In 1985, a young Barack Obama arrived in the city as a community organizer. Michelle Obama grew up in a South Side neighborhood. The OPC is anticipated to bring a major jolt of investment to that part of the city: According to the Obama Foundation, the center will have a \$339 million economic impact during construction, and \$177 million annually

from the three-building campus once it opens. An economic assessment by the Obama Foundation predicted the center would generate close to 5,000 jobs during construction and about 2,500 jobs after it opens, projecting a total economic impact of \$3.1 billion through its first decade.

But as the project advances, fear of gentrification in a community that is already uneasy about an encroaching University of Chicago to the north has ignited a debate among residents and others about the benefits of the center to Woodlawn. Will it be the villain in another tale of dislocation and gentrification? Or will it be a national model for how residents can play a significant part in developing a center that welcomes innovative businesses and improves the lives of its neighbors?

The OPC, whose plans were first revealed in May, is the first such presidential library to be sited in an urban, predominantly black neighborhood, increasing the stakes both for the community and the former president. The center will occupy the northwest section of the 543-acre park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and site of the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Besides the library itself, which will house a digital archive of Obama's non-classified records, the center will include a museum, meeting spaces, restaurants, and a garden.

Obama and his advisers stress its importance as a much-needed catalyst for community renewal. Woodlawn's population is now at about 24,150, according to a 2015 Census snapshot by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. While that's a daunting drop (in 1960 the area held 81,279 residents, the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* says), there have been recent signs that the community is rebounding, no doubt in part due to the upcoming library. The real estate website Redfin picked Woodlawn as the city's second-hottest neighborhood for 2017.

The debate over the center has revealed sometimes-conflicting hopes for a pocket of the city that is still shedding the residue of disinvestment, racism, and poverty.

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The Obama Presidential Center will be located in Jackson Park, across the street from Hyde Park High School. (José Alejandro Córcoles/The Chicago Reporter)

For Taylor, it's a matter of taking a stand against displacement. She's the education organizer for the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization and a leader in the task force advocating for a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA), a legal document that guarantees neighborhood involvement in development projects. Such agreements have worked successfully in urban neighborhoods from Los Angeles to New York City. One recent example: In 2008, the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team built an arena in the Hill District, a neighborhood that was once the city's black cultural center. The CBA for the project defined wage requirements and required developers to commit to \$8.3 million in neighborhood improvements, including a grocery store and youth center.

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The Obama Foundation, however, remains firmly opposed to a CBA. In previous public comments, the former president said that a CBA can be a “useful tool” when for-profit developers are involved, but maintained that, as a nonprofit, “We are bringing money to the community.” Instead, his foundation recently announced a search for a “diversity consultant” to enforce minority contracting and hiring.

Taylor casts a jaundiced eye at the prominent players in the OPC saga, particularly the University of Chicago, which will run programs with it. “How many times have we been played about everything that comes to this community that’s supposed to be for us, that’s not supposed to push us out?” she says.

The Obamas have considerable history with the University of Chicago. They own a home in Kenwood, a neighborhood of elegant mansions and low-rise apartment buildings just north of the university where Obama taught constitutional law for almost a decade before he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2004. Michelle Obama joined the university’s medical center staff in 2002. She was vice-president for community and external affairs when she resigned in 2009, shortly before her husband’s inauguration.

But the university’s reputation among South Side communities is decidedly mixed. In *Making the Second Ghetto*, historian Arnold R. Hirsch documents the university’s support of restrictive covenants, designed to limit the number of blacks living near it. Hirsch and other researchers unearthed previous university efforts to keep development inside its Hyde Park boundaries, while economic life was sucked from adjacent Woodlawn.

“There’s been a long history of people from Woodlawn not trusting the University of Chicago,” says Dominic Pacyga, urban historian and retired professor from Columbia College Chicago. “The university was the boogeyman.”

In an email, University of Chicago spokeswoman Marielle Sainvilus didn’t directly address the university’s history with Woodlawn or its position on a CBA, but touted the university’s support for affordable housing and economic development through its Office of Civic Engagement and work with groups such as the nonprofit developer Preservation of Affordable Housing. The UChicago Local initiative also works to match area business owners with contracts at the university and its medical center and unemployed and underemployed South Side residents with jobs.

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Neighborhood activist Naomi Davis in Jackson Park, future site of the Obama library. (José Alejandro Córcoles/The Chicago Reporter)

Despite such assurances, Woodlawn lawyer and activist Naomi Davis firmly believes that a CBA is essential for making sure those jobs go to local residents. “If we don’t have a system for recording what people promised, and holding them to account for it, then what if they don’t do what they said they were going to do?” she says.

In 2010, Davis moved to Woodlawn with her organization, Blacks in Green, which has worked to ensure that low-income residents on the South Side are fairly compensated in property takings, among other issues. “I was looking for a neighborhood like the one I grew up in,” she says. The neighborhood is a rarity today: African-American communities “where you could walk to work, walk to shop, walk to learn, and walk to play had gone extinct in my lifetime.”

When Davis is not in one of the community gardens in her neighborhood or hunched over maps and plats, she can be found at CBA meetings, where she’s joined by a growing coalition of groups, including the Chicago Teachers Union and Service Employees International Union Health Care Illinois/Indiana.

A specific jobs commitment and training for building and staffing jobs are crucial, according to Janet Smith, co-director and associate professor at the Natalie P. Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement at the University of Illinois at Chicago. A CBA also could include rent stabilization and property tax relief, so homeowners don’t get hit with soaring bills as housing values rise. “If it happens in such a way that my taxes go up or my rent goes up and I can’t afford to stay, then that’s wrong,” says Smith, a consultant to the CBA network.

Not all Woodlawn residents support the CBA, however: Longtime neighborhood power broker Rev. Byron Brazier, for example, thinks it isn’t necessary. “Woodlawn was creating its own plan before the library got here,” says Brazier, who took over the 18,000-member Apostolic Church of God from his famous father.

Specifically, he cites two initiatives to redevelop the community—the Network of Woodlawn, a community development collaborative that started in 2012, and 1Woodlawn, launched in 2015. Both focus on safety, education, and health issues, and both could be used to push for neighborhood priorities in future development.

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The most recent entry into this crowded field of community engagement players is a still-unnamed nonprofit that started last spring with \$250,000 from the Chicago Community Trust, a local foundation that also helped fund 1Woodlawn. Former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, a basketball pal of Obama, and Sherman Wright, managing partner of marketing communication and advertising firm Ten 35, are co-chairs of this 25-person entity, which is designed to ensure the struggling communities surrounding the center benefit from new investments. Some neighborhood activists, however, see it as an attempt to placate them, or even silence their voices.

Naomi Davis, who’s also a member of this new committee, says that won’t happen to her. She was picked by the Obama Foundation, the University of Chicago, the Obama Presidential Center, and other stakeholders. Davis is well aware of community champions who have been co-opted elsewhere—and she vows that she will not waver from her commitment to a CBA.

“They understood what they were getting.”

*This article is a partnership with The Chicago Reporter, an investigative news organization that focuses on race.*

## About the Author

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